DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 221 908 CS 503 989

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TITLE The Practice and Ethics of Telephone Survey Research: An Applied Perspective.
PUB DATE Nov 82
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association (68th, Louisville, KY, November 4-7, 1982).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Communication Skills; *Data Collection; *Ethics; Interviews; *Research Methodology; Research Problems; *Social Science Research; Surveys; *Telephone Communications Systems
IDENTIFIERS *Telephone Surveys

ABSTRACT

One popular method of generating large quantities of social science research data is telephone research. The interviewer's communication skill is a critical factor in determining the reliability and validity of such research. The interviewer should have a clear, pleasant, and understandable voice; be able to read through the questions fluently; and be able to respond to any questions asked by the interviewee. The advantages of the telephone survey include high response rates, personal format, low cost, and speed. The disadvantages include the limitations imposed by time considerations, the "between-interviewers" variance created automatically by using more than one interviewer, and the time and money wasted on calls to disconnected or commercial numbers. Other problems and errors common to many social science research methods also exist for telephone surveys. Researchers using the telephone survey method may wish to employ a number of ethical suggestions in their research endeavors. They should train interviewers to (1) listen carefully to what interviewees are saying in response to questions, (2) handle rude or obnoxious people in a positive way, (3) employ positive persuasive efforts to convince interviewees to participate or maintain interest in the interview, and (4) react patiently to subjects wanting to talk about topics that are of interest to them but which are irrelevant to the research. (HTH)

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THE PRACTICE AND ETHICS OF TELEPHONE SURVEY RESEARCH: AN APPLIED PERSPECTIVE

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Paper presented to the Sixty-eighth Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association, Louisville, Kentucky, Nov. 1982.

CS503989

A number of different information generating methods can be employed in a social science research project. One popular method of generating large quantities of data using accepted sociometric and sampling techniques is telephone research. This paper reviews the telephone research method, including a review of the advantages and disadvantages for using this method. Emphasis is placed on the pragmatic concerns for using telephone research for those scholars considering this method as a research tool. Finally, ethical considerations in telephone research are reviewed. Not as an effort to bridge the methodological gap between maintaining scholarly scientific research standards and the realities of accomodating extraneous variance in interviewers, but to improve the quality of the research (validity), as well as the satisfaction of both interviewers and interviewees.

Before a researcher chooses a particular data generating technique, he/she must determine how much sophistication their research tool should have, and how stringent their scientific research methods should be for the project being undertaken. Dillman reports that when a survey method choice is being made, the researcher should consider four major questions:

1. Do you want a representative sample?
2. Do you want to obtain answers to all your questions?
3. Do you want to obtain accurate answers?
4. Do you have the money, the time, and the skilled personnel to administer the survey?

Assuming the answers to these questions have led the researcher to employ the telephone research method, more specific concerns must then be addressed. These concerns can then be divided into four categories, which constitute the outline of this paper:

1. Pragmatics of telephone interviews
2. Advantages and disadvantages of telephone survey research
3. Problems and errors in telephone survey research
4. Ethical considerations in employing telephone survey techniques

PRAGMATICS OF TELEPHONE SURVEY RESEARCH INTERVIEWS

Telephone interviews are entirely dependent upon verbal communication. The complementing or validation value of nonverbal communication to verbal communication is non-existent. Therefore, the interviewer's communication skill is a critical factor in determining the reliability and validity of the research performed. Dillman determined that the telephone interviewer must have three essential communication skills if they are to perform their assignments successfully:

1. The interviewers voice should be clear, pleasant and understandable.
2. The interviewer must have the ability to read through the questions fluently.
3. The interviewer should be able to respond to the questions which are asked by the interviewee. (1) pp. 200-231

Dillman further emphasizes that these specific skills should be practiced continually, but accompanied with an informed knowledge of what works best in telephone research.

"Interviewing is an art, a skilled technique, which can be improved and eventually perfected primarily through continued practice. Practice alone, however, is not enough. Skills can be developed to their fullest potentialities when practice is accompanied by knowledge about interviewing." (1) pp. 254-257

The best interviewers are familiar with effective telephone research methods, and practice them for continued improvement.

ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF TELEPHONE SURVEY RESEARCH

Advantages

Telephone surveys are one of the most rapidly growing methods of data collection. They are easily administered and response rates are

generally high. The information which can be obtained is limited to: intentions, demographic characteristics, attitudes and opinions. The results of a telephone interview survey sample can be projected to the relevant universe with a high degree of accuracy. This method allows personal contact but is much cheaper than personal interviews and much faster than mail surveys. Costs depend on the length of the interview, but typically ranges from "$3-$8 per completed response when the survey is conducted by a professional research firm." (7) p. 64 The time to complete a telephone survey ranges "from one day to a few weeks." (5) p. 229 An additional advantage is that the director of the survey can moniter the interviews while they are conducted. A wide range of telephone sampling methods is also available. The six most common methods described by Ferber are:

1. Non-directory sample designs
   a. simple two-stage cluster
   b. two-stage cluster
   c. statified
2. Directory sample designs
   a. inverse sampling with probabilities proportional to size
   b. two random digits
   c. plus-one sampling (2) p. 408

Disadvantages

The amount of information that can be obtained in telephone research is limited by time considerations. Responses are subject to the influence and interviewer interpretation. Also, "between-interviewer" variance is created automatically by using more than one interviewer. Telephone survey research is notorious for poor inter-rater reliability without interviewer training and supervision. The cost of telephone research is another disadvantage in many cases. Time and money is wasted on calls to numbers that have been disconnected, or are commercial or institutional lines.

Typically, costs are 33 to 50 percent less than personal interviews and five to fifteen times as expensive as mail surveys. (5) p. 229 Uncontrolable extraneous variables of not being able to see the interviewee to determine interest and attentiveness, and the lack of control over the setting surrounding the respondent's answers also exist.

If telephone directories are used, a biased sample may result. Nineteen percent of U.S. households have unlisted numbers. (7) p. 604 Studies have shown that significant differences in characteristics between published and non-published numbers. Random digit dialing and Criss-Cross street directories are alternatives, but these methods are expensive.

PROBLEMS AND ERRORS IN TELEPHONE SURVEY RESEARCH

Not unlike many social science research methods, problems and potential errors exist in using telephone survey research methods. A list of the following concerns follows:

1. The total reliance on the respondent's retention of what they hear at a pace which is set by someone else.
2. The telephone interview setting places a limit on what and how much can be asked to obtain adequate answers.
3. Interviewees may not understand questions that are too long and complex with too many response categories. Problems occur in remembering categories when asked to rank them.
4. Interviewers may bias the study by explaining how he/she feels about the topic of the survey, or by explaining what the question means to him/her.
5. Interviewees tend to talk about themselves and consequently the conversation is dominated with their own experiences, which may not be relevant to the research topic.
6. Not all people have telephones and many have unlisted numbers, which biases the sample.

7. Telephone surveys may intrude on the respondent's privacy, or may involve a call at an inconvenient time.
8. The telephone interview involves a complete dependence on verbal communication. (1) pp. 232-282

Other potential problems or errors amy occur using telephone survey research methods which have been experienced by the author. Many interviewees are reluctant to use a rating scale. Even after an explanation of how a question should be answered based on a scale of responses, interviewees still preferred to give a verbal description as their answer. The exact answer would then be left up to the interviewer to determine, which resulted in considerable rater bias and inter-rater non-reliability.

Another problem may occur with respondents "getting stuck" or using over and over again the same numerical response. At least two possible explanations exist as to why this may occur. First, resondents may not realize that each concern asked of them should be related in relation to the other concerns. Perceptions typically vary among different concerns, so should an interviewees responses. Second, respondents may be intimidated by the idea of a survey and feel uncomfortable in using a rating scale. In order to minimize the perceived threat, respondents use the same numerical responses for all questions, thus leaving their real attitudes unknown to the study. The problems involved in using a numerical rating scale could be minimized by using a scale along the lines of "not very important", "important", and "very important". This type of scale would allow respondents a choice of answers, but the choices are fewer and there would be less hesitancy and confusion in answering. This method would place less emphasis on the relationship of each concern to the others, while still accomplishing the same type of result.

One other potential problem exists in the use of questions generating demographic-related information. Interviewees who had been willing and talkative throughout the interview may suddenly become reluctant to interact further. Also, interviewees may become hesitant to respond or be non-cooperative if the interviewer asks them to verify the interviewee's address that is already known from either the telephon book or mailing list sources.

Two other telephone research problems encountered from personal experience may also occur during data generation efforts. First, respondents may be threatened by male voices over the telephone during the evening hours. (after 6pm) And, second, certain interviewers seem to perform better with certain socio-economic interviewees, and worse with others. The first problem can be solved by employing only female interviewers after the hour of 6pm at night, with the understanding, of course, that such a practice may have a minimal affect on the overall composition of the data generated. The second problem can be solved by assigning particular interviewers to neighborhoods or city sections where they feel most comfortable calling. Interviewer attitude is essential in satisfying the needs of the interviewers, and most importantly in the generation of quality research.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS IN TELEPHONE SURVEY RESEARCH

Ethical considerations in any kind of research exist as a matter of personal choice and conviction on the part of the individual researcher. It is not the author's purpose to broach this subject and provide a taxonomy of ethical values, rules, and regulations. Appropriate scientific methods, if adhered to diligently, provide realistic answers to ethical considerations.

Instead this section describes a number of suggestions that scholars choosing to use telephone research as a survey method may wish to employ in their own research endeavors.

Having participated in several research efforts employing telephone research methods, the author suggests that perspective telephone survey researchers perform the following training functions before undertaking their own research project.

1. Train your interviewers to be acutely cognizant of what interviewees are saying in response to questions. (LISTEN) Because their are no non-verbal communication to observe, a dimension that interacting communicators normally rely heavily upon, interviewers must have extremely sharp listening skills. Without them, important information that may have been said will be lost form your research study. The information generated will only be as good as the interviewer's ability to gleen the important and relevant information provided by your subjects.

2. Train your interviewers to handle rude or obnoxious people whom they have contacted in a positive way. Instill a sense of personal value and respect in your interviewers so that interaction with the rude or obnoxious people does not either your interviewers or your study adversely. Take the time to ensure that your interviewers are satisfied with their job; their productivity and satisfaction will be rewarded in better research results.

3. Train your employees to employ persuasive efforts in a positive way in order to convince interviewees to participate or convince those losing interest, in completing the survey, to continue on to its successful completion. Enthusiasm, individual energy, and conviction for the research project are valuable commodities in telephone survey researchers. Make efforts for your interviewers to have them. The extra time spent in creating an energetic team, working for the common goal, the more sat-

isfaction both you and your interviewers will experience. The by-product will be an excellent completion ratio, as well as response rate.

4. Train your interviewers to react patiently to interviewees wanting to talk about topics of interest to themselves, which are often irrelevant to the research topic. Communication is a value-for-value exchange. As a researcher, you are calling people for the purpose of generating information concerning a topic that you perceive as having some value to you personally and/or to your professional study. The respondents to your survey research efforts have different values in the information exchange. Their value in participating in your study is not likely to be the same as your value. Accept the differences that will exist, and allow your interviewees to reap their value from the interaction, as well as you reaping your own. This will require patience on the part of the interviewers; a quality that can be instilled with appropriate training. Not only will such traing likely improve your survey method technique, but your interviewers experience long-range benefits of both the experience of interview training, and the ability to participate in further research, because they have the skills and references developed out of the research project.

Table 2.2 Rating of Face-to-Face Interviews, Telephone Interviews, and Mail Questionnaires for Selected Performance Characteristics

Performance Characteristics	METHOD		
	Face-to-Face Interviews	Mail Questionnaires	Telephone Interviews
I. Obtaining a Representative Sample			
A. Known opportunity for all members of population to be included in the sample.			
1. Completely listed populations.	High	High	High
2. Populations which are not completely listed (e.g., household occupants).	High	Medium	Medium
B. Control over selection of respondents within sampling units.	High	Medium	High
C. Likelihood that selected respondents will be located.	Medium	High	High
D. Insensitivity to substitution of respondents and households.	Medium	Low	Low
E. Response rates.			
1. Hetrogeneous samples (e.g., general public).	High	Medium	High
2. Homogeneous, specialized samples (e.g., agency directors, ministers, students).	High	High	High
F. Likelihood that unknown bias from refusals will be avoided.	High	Low	High
II. Questionnaire Construction and Question Design			
A. Allowable length of questionnaire.	High	Medium	Medium
B. Type of question.			
1. Allowable complexity.	High	Medium	Low
2. Success with open-ended questions.	High	Low	High
3. Success with screen questions.	High	Medium	High

Table 2.2 Continued

Performance Characteristics	Face-to-Face	Mail	Telephone
4. Success with controlling sequence.	High	Low	High
5. Success with tedious or boring questions.	High	Low	Medium
C. Success in avoiding item non-response.	High	Medium	High
D. Insensitivity to questionnaire construction procedures.	High	Low	Medium
III. Obtaining Accurate Answers			
A. Likelihood that social desirability bias can be avoided.	Low	High	Medium
B. Likelihood that interviewer distortion and subversion can be avoided.	Low	High	Medium
C. Likelihood that contamination by others can be avoided.	Medium	Medium	High
D. Likelihood that consultation will be obtained when needed.	Medium	Medium	Low
IV. Administrative Requirements			
A. Likelihood that personnel requirements can be met.	Low	High	High
B. Potential speed of implementation.	Low	Low	High
C. Keeping costs low.			
1. Overall potential for low per interview costs.	Low	High	Medium
2. Insensitivity of costs to increasing geographical dispersion.	Low	High	Medium

Taken from Don A. Dillman's book Mail and Telephone Survey, chapter 2.
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